

# FIG LEAVES

Volume 22 Issue 5

May 2013

**May 2013 Meeting:** Tuesday, May 28 7:00 pm  
 Holiday Office Park, 644 Linn Street, 3rd floor, Cincinnati 45203  
 (map & directions - see bottom of the page.)

## National Day of Reason: An Open Space Technology Conversation

The National Day of Reason is held in parallel with the National Day of Prayer, on the first Thursday in May each year. It was established to celebrate reason - a concept all Americans can support - and to raise public awareness about the persistent threat to religious liberty posed by government intrusion into the private sphere of worship. While our meeting is happening after May 2, the ideals for the Day of Reason separation of church and government, increased support for scientific research, access to health care options that aren't determined by religious beliefs should resonate all year long.

Open Space Technology is an innovative tool for creating dialogue and discussions. Participants suggests topics to discuss and tables are set up to allow for conversations on those topics. A major principle of Open Space Technology is the Law of Two Feet: "If you find yourself in a situation where you aren't learning or contributing, go somewhere else." This allows participants to engage in conversations on several topics if they desire.

### Directions

From SB I-75, take exit 1f.  
 At the end of the ramp, go straight onto Freeman Ave.  
 Turn left onto Dalton for about one block.  
 Turn left onto Linn St.  
 Turn right into Holiday Office Park.

**Holiday Office Park**, 644 Linn Street, 3rd floor, Cincinnati 45203  
 Holiday Office Park is located in Queensgate/West End at the corner of 8th and Linn St next to the Marathon Gas Station.  
 It is across 8th Street from the Ramada Inn.



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## Events

**May 2013 Meeting**  
 Tuesday May 28, 7:00PM  
 Holiday Office Park  
 644 Linn St., 3rd floor  
 Cincinnati, OH 45203



**Please Let Us Have Your E-mail Address!**  
 Whenever we send out an E-mail, several rejections are returned. To confirm your E-mail and Snail-mail address if it has changed, please send an E-mail to Brian Sellers at bsellers@fuse.net.



## April Meeting

### History and Nature of Guns

by Ed Kagin

Ed did not give us a talk about gun control or what to do about the 31,672 Americans who died from gun shots last year. Rather, Ed talked about the history of arms, the nature of guns, and about gun safety. In fact, one of his themes was the importance of guns in our history and to our civilization. Ed started with two basic rules of gun safety. Number one: all guns are always loaded, that means regard any gun as loaded, even if you personally, just unloaded it, and checked it. Someone may have loaded a bullet while you turned your head. And, rule two: never, ever point any gun at a person; unless you are ready and prepared to shoot. No matter how unloaded the gun is, too many known unloaded guns have killed someone.

Ed brought a satchel full of various guns to show and demonstrate. He started with a flintlock pistol. This type of gun was known to the earliest settlers in North America. It is a muzzle loader, which relies on the use of black powder for a propellant. Black powder consists of a mixture of finely ground charcoal, powdered sulphur, and potassium nitrate, also known as saltpeter. It is easy to prepare, and can be concocted with a good chemistry kit.

Muzzle loader means that a quantity of black powder is poured into the front opening of the barrel, a well greased lead ball follows, and a wad of greased paper is tamped down to keep the things from coming loose. Ignition is through a firing hole by a spark of a piece of flint striking a rough steel surface. Hence, flintlock pistol, gun, or musket. A standard long flintlock musket, the Brown Bess, was the weapon of the Revolution and this type of gun was still used in the Civil War. Any gun, Ed explained consists of three parts, the lock for firing, the stock where it is held, and the barrel. Thus, if you have anything lock, stock, and barrel, you have the whole thing. And, if your musket does not ignite, if you have merely a worthless spark and a flash - you have a "flash in the pan."

Musket loading is time consuming and gives you only one shot. Reloading takes at least some twenty to thirty seconds. In 1862 Samuel Colt invented the six-shooter. This was still a muzzle loader but you could load six separate extensions of the barrel in a rotating drum. The development of the cartridge came about 1873 making possible many types of multi-bullet guns. The six-shooter is also known as the "Gun that Won the West."

Another post Civil War development was the invention of rifling the inside of the barrel. A spiral groove forces the bullet to rotate, which makes both more accurate and more powerful. The difference between rifling in the barrel and a smooth bore defines the difference between a rifle and a gun, such as a shotgun which fires lead pellets from a smooth bore barrel. Ed also explained the difference between a fully automatic assault rifle - you pull the trigger once and hold and the rifle keeps spitting bullets. These are illegal in the United States and have been since the thirties. On a semi-automatic rifle you need to pull the trigger for each shot. You can only shoot as fast as you can pull the trigger.

Ed discussed bullet sizes, which are essentially fractions of an inch. Thus, a 38 or 45 caliber pistol or revolver loads shells with 0.38 or 0.45 inch diameter respectively. The same principle applies to metric bullets, thus 9 mm or 50 mm cartridges. Modern firearms use smokeless powder, consisting of various chemical formulas, many not available to the public. Ed showed us various pistols from his collection. A special treat near the end of his talk was the demonstration of a laser guided pistol. The laser light is so designed that it will point the path of the bullet, and the bullet when discharged will hit the spot where the laser points. Very effective and very frightening.

- Reported by Wolf Roder



**FIG Leaves** - Thoughtful articles, letters, reviews, reports, anecdotes, and cartoons are very welcome. Submit in Electronic format via the internet to figmessage at gofigger dot org; or on disk or typewritten via mail to Editor, FIG Leaves, P.O. Box 53174, Cincinnati, OH 45253. Contributions received before the first Friday of the month will be considered for publication that month.

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## April Family Game Night

On April 19, 2013, FIG held its first Family Game Night. The Family Game Night was established to create more opportunities for all ages to come together. We had 10 people who attended the family game night, including 2 children. We had snacks and drinks available, we spent the first 30 minutes eating and getting to know each other. There were a variety of board games, strategy games and card games available to play. As well, there were coloring pages, markers and crayons available for younger kids. The group decided to play Apples to Apples together.

If you haven't played Apples to Apples before, it consists only of two decks of cards: Red cards that have Things written on them and green Description cards. Each turn, one player (the referee) selects a Description card and the other players try to pick, from the Things cards in their hands, what best matches the Description card. The referee then chooses the card that appeals most to them and awards the Description card to the player who played it. The referee player role is then passed to the next player. Once a player has won a predetermined number of Thing cards, that player wins.

The family game night concept was borrowed from HCCO (the Humanist Community of Central Ohio.) HCCO started their family game night a few years ago and had a handful show up for the first few months, but now have larger crowds and have seen their involvement from younger freethinkers and families increase across all of their programs.

For FIG, our first family game night was a trial run to see if there was interest to continue with more game nights in the future. We have decided that there was definitely interest and will hold more game nights after the summer, since the summer schedule is more difficult to coordinate with vacations and summer camps. So be on the lookout for details of when Family Game Night will be held in September!

Reported by Shawn Jeffers



## Courageous Senators Stand Up to American People

By Andy Borowitz, *The New Yorker*, 22 April 13



In the halls of the United States Senate, dozens of Senators congratulated themselves today for having what one of them called “the courage and grit to stand up to the overwhelming wishes of the American people.”

“We kept hearing, again and again, that ninety per cent of the American people wanted us to vote a certain way,” said Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (RKentucky). “Well, at the end of the day, we decided that we weren’t going to cave in to that kind of special interest group.”

“It was a gut check, for sure, but we had to draw a line in the sand,” agreed Senator Lindsey Graham (R.S. Carolina). “If we had voted the way the American people wanted us to, it would have sent the message that we’re here in Washington to be nothing more than their elected representatives.”

Calling yesterday’s Senate action “a bipartisan effort,” Senator Mark Pryor (DArkansas) said, “This proves that on a matter that affects the safety of every man, woman, and child in the nation, we can reach across the aisle to defy the interests of all of them.”

Senator McConnell agreed that yesterday’s vote “sent a powerful message,” adding, “If the American people think that just because they voted us into office and pay our salaries, benefits, and pensions, we are somehow obliged to listen to them, they are sorely mistaken.”

This is satire, but how close to the truth is it?





## Contradiction Corner

By Dennis Davis



Welcome to my second in a series of articles discussing Biblical facts that ministers know but don't share with laymen. Last month I discussed the origins of the Septuagint and its sources, today I will discuss the remainder of the Hebrew Scriptures referred to by Christians as the Old Testament.

The Septuagint is followed directly by the books of Joshua and Judges and they tell of a supposed conquering of Canaan by Israel that is sweeping, brutal and intensely violent. The Bible says it happened in a single wave led by Joshua within a matter of a few years. Archaeology tells us that Canaan was occupied by Egypt at the time of the Exodus and Egypt withdrew shortly afterward due to internal strife. This led to more than a hundred years of decline and chaos as the city-states of Canaan fought each other to fill the vacuum. Many cities collapsed from declining population while others were burned and sacked repeatedly by their neighbors. The Conquest of Canaan by Joshua did not happen; instead it appears that the Hebrew people formed from wandering tribes in the Judean highlands. (Israel Finkelstein, *The Bible Unearthed* (Touchstone Press, 2001), p. 8690)

The historical books after Joshua and Judges tell of a glorious unified kingdom under David and Solomon only to have the northern half split off into a separate kingdom for trivial reasons. Archeological evidence indicates that the northern kingdom actually predates the southern and that the strife between David and Saul actually reflects the rise of the south in tension with the preexisting north. A unified twelve tribe Israel appears to be nothing more than political propaganda created by the southern kingdom during the reign of Josiah to claim land in the north after that kingdom was destroyed by the Assyrians. This first narrative continues through Samuel, Chronicles and Kings that conclude with the southern kingdom taken into captivity as well.

After a brief interlude for books of song and poetry (Psalms, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, Job), the narrative continues with books written after the Babylonian exile, including books such as Ezra, Nehemiah and writings called The Prophets (Obadiah, Micah, Ezekiel and so on) and several books that are both prophetic and narrative such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Daniel. Although many of the prophetic books claim to report events prior to the captivity, most scholars believe them to be written well afterward.

Daniel for example contains material that almost certainly refers to the Greek occupation during the Maccabean revolt indicating that it was written several hundred years after events it claims to record and well after the captivity. This narrative continues in books not contained in the Protestant Bible but can be found in Catholic Bibles, books such as I and II Maccabees.

When the Old Testament is read as a whole a picture emerges that is often overlooked by less diligent students of the Bible; and that image is one of evolution. The Hebrew deity evolves over time from the El Elyon of the Septuagint, having a physical body that speaks to Abraham and Moses face-to-face, into the ethereal, all-powerful monotheistic god we recognize today.

The Hebrews went through a similar transition from polytheism to monotheism. The earlier polytheism can easily be seen in pre-captivity writing, for example in Genesis 1:26, "Let us make man in our image." It is also plainly visible in the first of the Ten Commandments, "Thou shalt have no other gods before me." They were not told that there is only one god, but rather they were only to serve the one above all others. It isn't until after the captivity that we get strong monotheistic statements like Isaiah 45:6, "...there is none beside me, I am the LORD, and there is none else." It would appear that the Hebrews discovered true monotheism while in captivity (perhaps from Zoroastrian influence?)

The power of the Hebrew god changed over time as well. Reading Joshua and Judges it becomes obvious that the Israelite god was severely limited. He could only influence battles when his totem (the Ark of the Covenant) was present. The author of Judges 1:19 even states that although Israel had God on their side they could not defeat the people in the valleys of Canaan because they had iron chariots. Yet by the writing of Daniel chapter 2, the prophet is seen telling the Babylonian king that God not only controlled the fate of Israel, but of every empire in the world including Persia and Babylon. Ever notice that there is no mention of the afterlife in the Old Testament? That's because their god only had influence in this world, other Canaanite deities ruled the underworld. It is not until the Apocrypha and the Dead Sea Scrolls that we see Jews give their god rule over the dead.

Modern Biblical scholarship knows much about the Old Testament that the typical laymen do not know. While most people believe the Hebrew Scriptures to be a simple book of history, in fact it is complex collection of multiple sources that reveals far more about humanity than anything divine.

Next month I will continue with the New Testament, see you then...



## THINGS TO DO....

## THINGS TO SEE...



### Member's Library

Did you miss a speaker from the FIG 20 year program Fall 2011? Would you like to replay a presentation during your commute or Memorial Day car trip? John Welte has recorded and copied to CD's each speaker. Think Greta Christina "Why are Atheist's so Angry", JT Eberhard "Reason a Moral Imperative" or "A History of Free Thought in Cincinnati" by Prof. Bill Jensen. "We are not Unicorns" Jamila Bey, it's amazing how John got so many great speakers to come to Cincinnati for the 20 year. Darrel Ray "Sex and God". This collection is unique to FIG and available to loan.

Our Library is taking donations, loans are of course free to members. Many books; including Asimov's "Guide to the Bible" (two volumes in one) The old and new testament. Just carrying a book of this size will increase your intelligence. "The World is Flat" by Thomas Friedman is a new addition to the library.

From Terry Kassnel



### Such A Waste!

I had twelve bottles of whiskey in my cellar and I was instructed by my wife to empty each and every bottle down the sink. So I proceeded with the task.

I withdrew the cork from the first bottle and poured the contents down the sink, with the exception of one glass which I drank. I extracted the cork from the second bottle and did likewise with the exception of one glass which I drank.

I then withdrew the cork from the third bottle and poured the contents down the sink, with the exception of one glass which I drank.

I then pulled the cork from the fourth sink and poured the bottle down the glass which I drank. I pulled the

### Science Book Club

#### 2013 Schedule

All meetings on 3rd Sunday of the month except in June on the 2nd Sunday. All meetings at the Cincinnati and Hamilton County downtown Public Library in room 3A except May in room 3B.

**May 19 (room 3B)** *The Limits to Growth : the 30 year update* - Donella Meadows, Jorgen Randers, Dennis Meadows, 2004.

**June 9** *Why Does the World Exist? An existential Detective Story* - Jim Holt

**July 21** *The Signal and the Noise : Why Most Predictions Fail but Some Don't* - Nate Silver, 2012.

**August 18** *The Earth in Turmoil: Earthquakes, Volcanoes, and their impact on HumanKind* - Kerry Sieh, Simon LeVay, 1998

**September 15** *End this Depression Now!* - Paul Krugman, 2012

**October 20** *Incognito: the Secret Lives of the Brain* - David Eagleman, 2011

**November 17** *The Republican Brain : the Science of Why They Deny Science and Reality* - Chris Mooney, 2012

**December 15** *Time Reborn: From the Crisis in Physics to the Future of the Universe* - Lee Smolin, 2013



bottle from the cork of the next one and drank one sink out of it and threw the rest down the glass. I pulled the sink out of the glass and poured the cork from the bottle. Thin I corked the sink with the glass, bottled the drink, and drank the pour.

When I had every thing emptied I steadied the house with one hand, counted the bottles, corks, glasses and sinks with the other which were twenty-nine, and put the houses in the bottle which I drank.

I'm not under the affluence of incahol, but thinkle peep I am. I'm not half so thunk as you might drink. I fool so feelich I don't know who is me, and the drinker I schtand here the longer I get. ☺



## “Last Chance to Stop Homosexual Activists and Atheists from Destroying the Boy Scouts”

Family Research Council

It’s springtime in D.C. The cherry blossoms are in full bloom, birds are singing and the attack on science, reason and secular values has blossomed with a reenergized fervor. The Family Research Council charged its supporters to stop the atheists from destroying the boy scouts, but they are not the only group that has been busy.

### Since just April 1, 2013:

- North Carolina legislators proposed a bill declaring their right to establish an official state religion.
- US Senator (R, LA) David Vitter sent a letter to his constituents that read, “Easter reminds us to look past our many self-made problems and remember that God gave his only Son for our salvation.”
- US Rep. Joe Barton (RTX) spoke before the Subcommittee on Energy and Power and said, “-the Great Flood is an example of climate change and that certainly wasn’t because mankind had overdeveloped hydrocarbon energy.”
- Caving under pressure from the religious lobby including US Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Obama administration softened its contraceptive mandate by rescinding 3 of the 4 criteria for exemption allowing most religious employers to deny contraceptives to their employees
- In Washington state, where a bill that would allow discrimination based on religious beliefs is being considered, the attack was venomous as well as ignorant. When asked what rural gays should do if the only gas station or grocery store for miles won’t sell them gas and food, a staffer in Washington State Senator Mike Hewitt’s office answered “Well, gay

people can just grow their own food.”

The Secular Coalition for America has answered each assault swiftly and proactively:

- The Secular Coalition for North Carolina mobilized to address the bill that is now dead.
- We have contacted Senator Vitter’s and Senator Barton’s offices to meet and address the messages that were distributed using public funds.
- At our April 25, 2013 Secular Summit, we confronted the anti-science legislation that is sweeping the nation and crippling our students with an Education panel featuring actual Congressional staffers.
- We pulled no punches in our comments on the Health and Human Services mandate. Our comments aggressively and decisively dismantled the claims made by the US Conference of Catholic Bishops. All of our member organizations signed onto the comments.

*And we are not done fighting!*

The Secular Coalition for America will continue to address and fight all religious influence on the Hill and in state legislatures because you, our loyal supporters, have trusted us to do so! We are on the front-lines making sure our constituency is visible and influential on the Hill.

Your gift of \$20, \$50, or \$100 will help the Secular Coalition for America stay vigilant. We need your help to continue our progress. The Family Research Council fears that atheists will end “biblical morality and push Christian influence in our society further into the closet.” Help us make those fears a reality!

With your support, we can make springtime in Washington, DC, the season for secular change!

Sincerely,  
Edwina Rogers, Executive Director





## CFI Summit

Should the examination of religious beliefs remain largely off limits for skeptics? Should secular humanists be as critical of fringe science claims, including alternative medicine, as they are of religious beliefs? To what extent do skeptics and humanists have a common mission? Both skeptics and humanists support science and critical thinking; but what else unites them? Are there public policy issues on which skeptics and humanists can productively collaborate?

The best way to answer these questions is to bring skeptics and humanists together to talk about them; and that's exactly what we are doing. On **October 24-27, 2013**, we are holding **The CFI Summit**: a joint conference of the Center for Inquiry and its affiliate organizations, the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry and the Council for Secular Humanism.

The heated battles over church-state separation, the health crisis caused by vaccine misinformation, the threats to our schools from pseudoscience and pseudo-history, the oppression of women and religious dissidents around the world, the countless victims of fraudulent psychics and alt. med. practitioners, the growth of the "Nones" and the sociology of belief, and where humanists and skeptics can (and cannot) work together - all of it will be part of the grand discussion at the CFI Summit.

Speakers already scheduled to appear at this landmark event include science entertainer Bill Nye, author Susan Jacoby, physicist and author Leonard Mlodinow, science education advocate Eugenie Scott, science journalist Cara Santa Maria, scholar of secularism Phil Zuckerman, atheist blogger Greta Christina, activist and philanthropist Todd Stiefel, journalist and author Katherine Stewart, psychologist and performer Richard Wiseman, secularist orator Sean Faircloth, along with many more names to be announced in the coming weeks - Plus a special live edition of the Point of Inquiry podcast with hosts Indre Viskontas and Chris Mooney!

The CFI Summit will also have a first, for CFI President & CEO Ronald A. Lindsay will host an exclusive Members Meeting. A chance for CFI Friends of the Center and Associate Members of CSH or CSI to join in conversation with organization leadership. Members will be able to weigh in on what they see as the best way forward for our movement, and how our organizations can best work together to achieve those goals.

**Register!**



### How Many Cells Does It Take To Make A Person?



A month ago the US Supreme Court ended an effort to shut down government support of human embryonic stem cell research by refusing to hear a case that challenged the legality of such work at NIH. Good! Embryonic-stem-cell research is thought by many to be the most promising approach to treatment of numerous human diseases, but twenty years ago anti-abortionists pushed a bill through Congress banning the use of federal funds for research on human embryos. Some religions believe the Holy Ghost bestows a soul on a zygote at the moment of conception, making the zygote a one-celled person. The Obama administration rejected this silly superstition, but it was kept alive in the courts by the appeal process. Rejection of the appeal by the Supreme Court assures resumption of potentially life-saving stem-cell research.

- *What's New* by Robert L. Park, 8 February 2013



### Quote

Political language "is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give an appearance of solidity to pure wind."

- George Orwell (1903-1950)

### Unquote





## Jesus and Muhammad and the Question of the State

By Juan Cole, Informed Comment, 26 April 13

I've always liked Andrew Sullivan even when I disagree with him. I'm going to disagree with him, or more specifically Alexis de Tocqueville and one of his readers who quotes him:

Muhammad brought down from heaven and put into the Koran not religious doctrines only, but political maxims, criminal and civil laws, and scientific theories. The Gospels, on the other hand, deal only with the general relations between man and God and between man and man. Beyond that, they teach nothing and do not oblige people to believe anything. That alone, among a thousand reasons, is enough to show that Islam will not be able to hold its power long in ages of enlightenment and democracy, while Christianity is destined to reign in such ages, as in all others.

This quote, from *Democracy in America*, is a typical sort of nineteenth century Orientalism (Edward Said's book was published in 1978; has every thinking person not read it by now?) It is a little bizarre that de Tocqueville was eager to accommodate Christianity to Enlightenment principles, given that much of the Enlightenment was hostile to Christianity. De Tocqueville, a strange mixture of conservatism and modernism, thought Roman Catholicism was the religion best suited to a democratic society, at a time when the popes were fulminating against . . . democracy (see below).

You can't compare Christianity and Islam on the basis of this kind of characterization of the founders of the two religions. The characterization is in any case unfair (the New Testament texts imply just as many 'scientific principles' as does the Qur'an, e.g. they think the world has three levels, that there are demons and angels, etc. etc.)

First of all, we know very little about the lives of Jesus (d. circa 30-33 CE) or Muhammad (d. 632 CE). As a historian, I'm looking for early sources and diverse sources. The earliest manuscripts of the New Testament are second century, and in Greek rather than in the original Aramaic (some ideas may have changed radically with the translation the Aramaic almost certainly did not have the phrase 'son of God.')

There are many variants among the manuscripts and among the Gospels. Did Mark even know about a resurrection? There are even questions about what sources early Christians accepted (is the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas a Gospel?) All of the extant accounts of Jesus obviously come from a small number of early Christian communities. There is no early outside source. We historians want accounts coming from several different sources.

The idea that, as de Tocqueville alleged, very early Christianity made no doctrinal demands about the relationship of the

believer to power is not clearly in evidence. Take St. Peter (2 Peter 2:12:17: "But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive opinions.") Wouldn't that be a community problem that would have to be dealt with collectively? Also very surprised by this allegation would have been the masses of Christians killed by Christian states for being heretics. And, just for instance, Charlemagne had 4500 Saxon followers of Woden (you've all seen the movie Thor) beheaded in 782 because they wouldn't accept Christianity. That is a lot of heads to be lost to a religion that makes no power demands. Not to mention that modern Christian fundamentalism has cleverly found ways of re-importing selective legal injunctions from the Hebrew Bible into Christianity.

As for Muhammad, the earliest extant biography is by Ibn Hisham (d. 834), based on a work he says was written 130 years after the Prophet's death. This would be like relying on an oral tradition about Napoleon Bonaparte being written down from memory right now by an elderly man in Corsica. Unlike with Jesus, there are actually non-Muslim accounts of the rise of Islam and 7th century mentions of Muhammad, though not substantial ones. The Dar al Qur'an in Sanaa, Yemen, contains papyrus Qur'ans in Kufi script that the German researchers there told me years ago they think go back to the late 600s. The Qur'an, contrary to what some researchers such as John Wansbrough suggested, seems to be pretty well attested as an integral text fairly early on, maybe even better attested than the entire New Testament in the first century after its composition. The sayings attributed to Muhammad were not collected and written down for some 200 years after the Prophet's death, and I personally don't consider many of them historically reliable.

The New Testament picture of Jesus is full of contradictions. At some points he says to turn the other cheek and forgive enemies. At other points he says, "I come not to bring peace but a sword" (Matthew 10:34). Scholars have wondered if Jesus was a Zealot, a highly political and revolutionary movement. Or was he a mystic similar to those who wrote the Dead Sea Scrolls? Frankly we have no idea whether he intended to build a state or not. He seems to say that he thought his teachings would divide families: "and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death." (Matthew 10:21.) That sounds like a generational revolution to me. The jurisdiction of Roman law in Palestine at that time was mainly for political rebels, and it is not without significance that the Romans crucified him; had he been just a harmless Jewish mystic and viewed as a heretic, the Romans would have never bothered to get involved. No two academic books I've ever read on the life of Jesus and early Christianity have agreed about these issues.

Even if Jesus really was an apolitical pacifist, only a tiny number of Christians in history has ever agreed with him about





that. Even if his statement about rendering to Caesar implied a separation of religion and state (unlikely), most Christians in history haven't been willing to do that. Even today, many Christians in the United States have mobilized to ban abortion, even for non-Christians for all Americans on the basis of their current religious doctrine. Isn't that a demand for Theocracy Lite?

So these ideas in very early Christianity are anyway irrelevant to practical politics in later Christianity, which saw all kinds of political arrangements. You may remember the Holy Roman Empire, which did not agree that Christianity implied no ideology of the state, and which was the primary crucible of the religion and civilization for centuries.

As for Muhammad, it is not entirely clear what his position was in Medina. He is often depicted as a theocrat. But it appears from the Qur'an that when he first went there in 622 he was more like a community organizer, balancing the needs of the Muslim, Christian, pagan and Jewish communities in the area. The stories of how he allegedly fell out with the Jews there are very late and have been questioned by some scholars. The view of him as a kind of king could well be a projection back on him by later writers of the Umayyad and Abbasid dynasties, after forms of Muslim kingship and empire had emerged. Common assertions that the Qur'an disallowed paganism or allowed aggressive war on pagans are not borne out by the Qur'an. There is, contrary to de Tocqueville, very little law or politics in the Qur'an.

Much of fundamentalist Muslims' ideas about religionstate relations are shaped by the Hadith literature, the oral sayings and doings attributed to the Prophet, which, as I said, were collected centuries after his death and I doubt most academic historians would consider them reliable. (I know saying so will offend some of my readers, but, well, I'm a historian.) The Hadith literature is just enormous, a kind of Muslim Talmud, and I find many of the reports contradictory to others. Some of them are actually Jewish law brought in by Jewish converts (as with stoning adulterers) that contradicts the Qur'an (which prescribes whipping instead).

As with Christianity, there are almost no forms of political organization Muslims haven't tried out, from monarchy to republic, from anarchism to democracy. So, all those laws and political principles in the Hadith haven't actually been determinative. Contemporary Muslim fundamentalism does dream of using them as a blueprint, but since that enterprise isn't actually practical, they don't get very far. Even Iran and Saudi Arabia are mostly governed by modern bureaucratic rationalism of a sort Max Weber would readily recognize.

Nowadays, almost all Protestant Christian communities are organized on the basis of the nation-state. Even most Catholic communities de facto are, as well. And, most Muslim communities are exactly the same. There is a Sunni Muslim mufti

of Egypt, there is a Shiite ayatollah of Iran. Some religious leaders have followers across national lines (as also is true in Christianity), but for the most part the nation-state is the unit of community organization and the arena of community action.

Contrary to what de Tocqueville imagined, the Muslims have been just as adaptable as Christians to the main forms of social organization that came out of the Enlightenment. He was writing at a time when many Muslims lived under the Ottoman Empire, which seems to have shaped his image of the religion. Somehow Islam has handily survived the Ottoman demise. And what de Tocqueville rather dishonestly did not bother to mention was that Christianity has had just as much trouble with those principles as Islam has. There was that little Syllabus of Errors when the then Pope condemned democracy, popular sovereignty, separation of religion and state, scientific rationalism, etc. Later Popes even tried to prevent Catholics from voting in elections because democracy was considered a modernist heresy. As late as Franco's Spain, the Spanish church was a pillar of dictatorship. Eventually the church made its peace with democracy (partly through Vatican II, which largely repealed the Syllabus of Errors). Islam is likewise coming to terms with democracy, however contentious and uncertain that process has been (Indonesia, Turkey, Tunisia, etc. etc.)

Many 19th century Christians imagined that Islam was on its last legs and that all the Muslims would convert to Christianity. They thought the same of Hinduism and Buddhism. They mostly were very wrong. De Tocqueville's arrogance and simplistic view of the original >essence' of the founders of the two religions was a profound set of errors. In fact, by the end of this century, some 30% of the world could well be Muslim, whereas Christianity will likely be a shrinking proportion of humankind, just for demographic reasons. Not to mention that most "Christian" countries contain pluralities of nonreligious people. Many, such as Sweden or Eastern Europe, have nonreligious majorities. Significant proportions of Turks, Tunisians, Uzbeks, etc. in the Muslim world also report that they aren't interested in religion.

It is not impossible that modern consumerism, individualism and technology might gradually undermine religion, so that 200 years from now neither Christianity nor Islam will be central to most peoples' lives.

So, a) Muslims aren't more prone to violence or terrorism than members of other religious communities because of the character of very early Islam and b) you can't read off the differences between Christians and Muslims from a superficial depiction of the two founders.

Juan Cole is Professor of History of the Middle East and South Asia at the University of Michigan. 





## Are the Westboro Baptists Right?

By Michael E. Buckner, VP Atlanta Freethought Society

The Westboro Baptists do seem to be right in claiming that the Bible depicts God as judgemental, domineering, inflexible, sadistic, obsessed with humans' sex lives, and petty. For example:

If a man has sexual relations with a man as one does with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable. They are to be put to death; their blood will be on their own heads. (Leviticus 20:13)

(Of course in the 14th chapter of Deuteronomy the same word in Hebrew which translates to "abominable" or "detestable" is used to describe eating pork or shellfish as is used in Leviticus to describe man-on-man sex).

Again according to the Bible, I can't see God being too fond of rich preachers like the aptly-named Rev. Dollar:

Jesus answered, "If you want to be perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then, come follow me." When the young man heard this, he went away sad, because he had great wealth. Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God." (Matthew 19:21-24)

Heck, Jesus seems to be against not just being "rich," but even against simply being prudent with money:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

Now, as for most freethinkers, we don't think two consenting adults who love each other (or, heck, just two consenting adults who lust for each other) are necessarily doing anything "detestable" or "abominable."

We don't like Creflo Dollar or his ilk, but we don't hate all rich people just for being rich: there are rich people who have become rich not just by fleecing the gullible but because they've done things at least some of which are admirable, like found companies that employ thousands of people and provide goods and services that enrich people's lives. While we agree it's good to take a somewhat philosophical attitude towards life and material goods, to literally take no thought for the morrow is dangerously imprudent (and if someone is claimed to be the Son of God, there's a real danger people will take his words (sorry, His Words) all too literally). We also don't think we should hate our families or hate our own lives (Luke 14:26).

Of course, all the sane Christians and even the most of the crazy ones "interpret" this and everything else in the Bible in some way or another that lets them off this or that hook; those on the right ignore (or re-interpret) the parts about the sinfulness of the rich and those on the left ignore (or re-interpret) the parts about the sinfulness of gays; pretty much everyone ignores (or re-interprets) the parts about slaves obeying their masters or women being silent and obeying their husbands or about the need to put worshipers of false gods to death. Most 21st century American Christians don't take any of this stuff from the Bible literally (even increasingly including the gay-bashing). Most American Christians nowadays are basically humanists; they believe in democracy, equal rights for women, freedom of religion, and even gay marriage. But too many of them still feel some need to try to contort these ancient texts into agreeing with what people nowadays believe in, regardless of what the words actually say.

All of which is far too long-winded to easily fit on protest signs, alas. There are bizarre and goofy Bible verses that don't necessarily say anything about homosexuality, or even Creflo Dollar, like the one about hating your family—a particularly pernicious one.

We're glad to be Americans, freethinkers who can celebrate the Fourth of July without having to feel guilty about it.

And when it comes to verses like Leviticus 20:13, as atheists and freethinkers, we don't have to hate people just because of who they love.

Source: *The Sparationist, Secular Humanists of the Low Country* (Newsletter, April 2013)





## BOOK REVIEW

### *The Rocks Don't Lie: A Geologist Investigates Noah's Flood*

by David R. Montgomery  
(New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2012)

How did some Christians, - modern fundamentalists, - ever get the idea the first dozen or so pages of the Hebrew Scriptures are to be taken literally? How could a reasonable person ever think that a god fashioned the earth, - or the Universe? - in a mere seven days, before days existed, and later flooded water over the global sphere, - or over a square with four corners? - to drown every living thing. Or, perhaps not the fishes, and maybe not the birds? What were birds doing on Noah's Ark? All this history to have taken place in a mere six, or so, thousand years.

These ideas were not held by early Christians. The founders of the Christian faith, the so called Church Fathers did not hold these ideas. They professed no knowledge of the age of the earth, nor did they consider the first book, Genesis, as a precise description of history. Rather they, and particularly St. Augustine, proclaimed the Hebrew Scriptures as more allegorical than real. Today we know that written history of Sumer and Egypt extend to more than six thousand years in the past.

Montgomery has written a brief history of geological knowledge. His emphasis is on the early period, beginning in the mid-seventeenth century with Nicolas Steno. He describes for us how geological knowledge gradually separated itself from understandings gathered from the Bible. Early thinkers, and most of all observers of rocks in the field and landscapes, fully expected to find evidence of a world-wide flood. In fact, the ubiquitous existence of layers of sedimentary rocks, spoke of material deposited out of water. Once fossils were recognized as remains left by actual plants and animals, it was easy to see them as the victims of Noah's Flood. This must be true, since fossils only occur in sedimentary rock.

The grandfather of geology, Nicolas Steno, accepted the reality of the Flood. He suggested three principles which are still fundamental to geology. First, that water lays sediments down horizontally. Two, any fossils must have been enclosed in the sediments when they were laid, and three, the lowermost sedimentary rocks must have been laid first, and thus must be the oldest. To account for sedimentary rocks at angles to the horizontal, Steno suggested they must have collapsed into caverns, from which the water of the great flood issued.

Accepting fossils as remnants of past life opened an entire new set of questions. Many fossils were recognized as extinct

creatures. But didn't god instruct Noah to save two of each creatures. Perhaps the ammonites, common fossils in Great Britain, were still alive somewhere on earth? But, as the whole earth was explored and new animals found, it raised the question how had they survived the Ark, and how had they traveled to Australia, or the Americas? Had god started a new, a second creation for these far away continents, and just failed to tell Christianity in the scriptures.

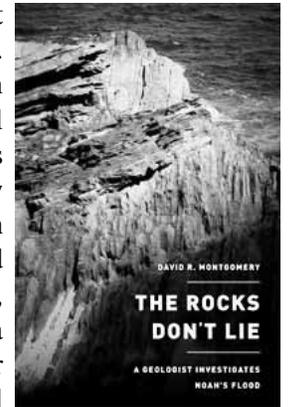
Yet, as missionaries and colonial officials collected historical lore from around the world, many people had tales of a great flood. Was this a world-side flood, i.e. Noah's, or common stories of local or regional events. Montgomery identifies significant differences among these stories, appropriate whether river floods, tsunami waves, or flood loosened by vulcanism.

At the very end of the eighteenth century James Hutton interpreted superposition of two differently angled sedimentary rocks as an unconformity. The older rocks had been uplifted and eroded again, to eventually sinking beneath the sea and renewed sediment deposition. Many thousands of years must have passed if Hutton should be proved right, which eventually he was. Much of the nineteenth century saw the gradual growth of modern geological science, understanding of the many ages in which rocks were eroded and re-deposited. By the time Charles Darwin published his great work, even clergy who had examined the geological argument accepted that the first dozen pages of the Hebrew Scriptures could not be taken literally. The creation, the Garden, the tree and the snake were allegory.

Primitive, literal interpretation of Genesis was revived by one man, George McCready Price (1870-1963) who published his *The New Geology* in 1923. He argued that all rocks, all fossils, all river courses including the Grand Canyon, in short the surface of the Earth had been carved by the waters of the Biblical Flood, and this left all the fossils behind. No geologist or other scientist could take his argument seriously. It was hardly worth refuting. Not until 1961 did a theologian, John C. Whitcomb and a engineer, Henry M. Morris, publish *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and its Scientific Implications*, essentially reiterating Price's errors.

Montgomery provides a clear and readable history of the evolution of geological thinking. He also informs us how current "flood geology" arose. The Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky, is not based on traditional or original Christian thinking, but on the recent argument of Price, Whitcomb, and Morris.

- Wolf Roder ☿





**May FIG Meeting**  
 Tuesday, May 28, 7PM  
 Holiday Office Park - 3rd floor



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# FIG

## Our Purpose

The Free Inquiry Group, Inc. (FIG) is a non-profit organization founded in 1991. FIG is allied with the Council for Secular Humanism as well as an affiliate of the American Humanist Association and of the American Atheists. Though most of our members are secular humanists, we welcome to our meetings anyone interested in learning about or furthering our purpose.



*To foster a community of secular humanists dedicated to improving the human condition through rational inquiry and creative thinking unfettered by superstition, religion, or any form of dogma.*

In accordance with our purpose, we have established the following goals:

- To provide a forum for intelligent exchange of ideas for those seeking fulfillment in an ethical secular life.
- To develop through open discussion the moral basis of a secular society and encourage ethical practices within our own membership and the community at large.
- To inform the public regarding secular alternatives to supernatural interpretations of the human condition.
- To support and defend the principles of democracy, free speech, and separation of church and state as expressed in the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights.

For more information, write the Free Inquiry Group at the address above, e-mail - [figmessage at gofigger dot org](mailto:figmessage@gofigger.org), or visit our web site at [gofigger.org](http://gofigger.org) or [freeinquirygroup.org](http://freeinquirygroup.org).